

A Study of Lexical Variation in Seven Zhuang Dialects¹

Pranee Kullavanijaya

Chulalongkorn University

As a student of Comparative Tai under Fang Kuei Li some 30 years ago, I learned that northern Zhuang belonging to the Northern Tai group differed phonologically and lexically from southern Zhuang belonging to the Central Tai group. I did not realize how different the two Zhuang dialect groups were lexically until I observed that my southern Zhuang assistant hesitated to help me with the editing of a small dictionary of Wuming Zhuang and Thai, saying that he did not really know what the words meant in northern Zhuang. Then I wondered how much basic vocabulary the two dialect groups share. In the research project “The Relationship Between the Zhuang and the Thai” conducted in 1987–1990, I decided, therefore, to do a study of 245 lexical items in seven locations in Guangxi, not only to satisfy my long-term curiosity but also because in a survey type of research, as our project was, the first step is usually a phonemic and lexical study of the language. In this paper I present the results of that study.

1. LOCATION SELECTION AND WORD LIST

In the project mentioned above, we decided to conduct field work so that we could have the rare experience of seeing and feeling how the Zhuangs led their lives. Certainly, without the unfailing help of our friends at the Guangxi Institute of Nationalities in Nanning, we, the team of four Thai women, could never have been able to collect our data. In selecting the locations, we made sure that the northern and southern Zhuang dialects were equally covered. Several factors, for example, permission to get into certain counties, road conditions, and the distance to the villages, limited our choices. In the end, we selected seven locations, namely, Boning Village in Chongzuo County, Faimor Village in Yongning County, Damraak Village in Yongning County, Debao County, Wuthang Village in Yongning County, Tamwang Village in Tiandong County and Banlao Village in Nandan County. In the first four locations southern Zhuang is spoken, in the last three, northern Zhuang.

Because of the very limited time we could spend at each location, and because I had to spend a part of the time selecting an informant and getting acquainted with him or her so that we could work together well, I decided to work on a short word list of 245 lexical items. These items covered seven basic lexical classes: body organs (33 items), basic verbs and adjectives (46 items), animals (46 items) household objects (29 items), weather phenomena (35 items), rice farming (21 items), and plants (35 items).

¹ This work was presented orally at the First International Zhuang Studies Symposium, Wuming, China, 15–18 April 1999.

Lexical items were selected on the hypothesis that there should not be much lexical variation in the Zhuang dialects if the lexical items were within the scope of basic concepts in everyday life. Also, lexical variants were expected to fall either in the northern dialect group or the southern one. The items were drawn from my own compiled list, from F-K. Li's lists, and from William J. Gedney's list.

We will see that even with these basic lexical items which were expected to produce only cognates, we came up with quite a number of lexical variants.

2. STUDY RESULTS

The study of lexical data collected in 1988 in the seven mentioned locations (see the Appendix) gives the following results:

2.1. Types of Lexical Variants

Lexical variants from 245 lexical items can be grouped into three main types.

2.1.1. One-word lexical items

Lexical items represented by only one word, (no variants), will be referred to as "One-word lexical items." Such lexical items altogether comprise 109 of the total or about 44.4 %. As a criterion for inclusion in this group, these one-word lexical items must be used in at least six locations. That is, I have decided to ignore a variant in one spot if the other variant is used in the other six locations. This is because my research aim was to determine the degree of intelligibility among speakers of the seven dialects. However, such one-word lexical items used in only six dialects, not all seven, are only 11 in number; the other 98 items are found in all seven locations.

Examples of one-word lexical items:

Beard	mom ⁴	mum ⁴	mum ⁴	mum ⁴	məm ⁴	mom ⁴	mum ⁴
To sleep	nɔn ²	nin ²	nin ²	nin ²	nən ²	nən ²	nɔn ¹
White ant	kjuk ¹	tu ¹ cuk ⁵	<u>mat</u> ¹ <u>ha:w</u> ¹	kok ³	tu ¹ khlok ⁵	kuk ³	kuk ³
Spade	mak ³ khwa:k ⁴	kuak ⁵	kuaʔ ⁵	khwak ⁵	kuak ⁵	kwak ⁵	pa:j ¹

2.1.2. Two-variant lexical items

From the data there are 47 lexical items that are of the two-variant lexical-item type. This means that for each lexical item, there are two different words used in the seven Zhuang dialects, for example:

Navel	ʔdok ¹ ʔdəj ¹	ʔaj ¹ ʔdia ¹	θa:j ¹ ʔdu ¹	ʔo:j ¹ ʔbi: ¹	θa:j ¹ ni ¹	ʔa:j ¹ nu ¹	ʔdoŋ ³ dej ¹
White	phə:k ⁴	ha:w ¹	ha:w ¹	phiak ⁴	puak ⁴	ha:w ¹	khau ¹

2.1.3. Multi-variant lexical items

What is meant by multi-variant lexical items is that for each lexical item, there are more than two different words given in all seven Zhuang dialects, for example:

Sleepy	ʔoŋ ⁶ nən ²	law ⁵ nin ²	ʔan ²	buak ⁴	pa:j ⁵ thaw ¹ nən ²	ta: ¹ lap ³	tha ² bəj ⁵
Knife	mjak ³ pja ⁶	mit ⁴	mit ⁴	ja: ⁵	mət ⁴	cha ⁶	pja ⁶

There are altogether 89 lexical items of the multi-variant lexical item type.

2.2. Distribution of Lexical Variant Types in the 7 lexical classes

Using the three types of lexical variants to examine each of the seven lexical classes, we have various distributions as shown in the following table. However, these different distributions give us a picture of lexical intelligibility as will be discussed in the next section.

Lexical classes Lexical variant types	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
One-word lexical items	19	15	24	13	12	13	13	<u>109</u> 44.5%
Two-variant lexical items	8	10	8	6	8	1	6	<u>47</u> 19.2%
Multi-variant lexical items	6	21	14	10	15	7	16	<u>89</u> 36.3%
Total	<u>33</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>245</u>
Percentage of one-word Items	57.6	32.6	52.2	44.8	34.3	61.9	37.1	100

Lexical classes:

- 1 = Body organs
 2 = Basic Verbs and Adjectives
 3 = Animals
 4 = Household objects
 5 = Weather phenomena
 6 = Rice farming
 7 = Plants

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The table in 2.2 shows that from all 245 lexical items, the seven Zhuang dialects share only 109 words in common or about 44.5% compared to the multi-variant type which amounts to 89 or 36.3%. It seems that there is a considerably high degree of lexical unintelligibility. However, if the two variant type is taken into consideration, it